

Short Fiction Contest

Approx 3942 words

## **The Mime**

By Coleman

© Coleman 2008  
2950 State Highway 39  
Mineral Point, WI 53565  
608 987 2324  
[coleman@mhtc.net](mailto:coleman@mhtc.net)

1.

---

Alan seeks coffee. American coffee. He turns down the Avenue de Jean Medicin toward the familiar if garishly intrusive McDonald's sign. What he gets for his small effort is decidedly not American coffee. It is not French coffee. It is probably not even coffee at all. He must remember to add it to the Monday morning agenda. It will make for interesting conversation with his corporate colleagues back in Oak Brook. Someone will want to know the address of the restaurant. Someone else will locate the franchisee's name. A few days later, there will be an unannounced inspection, and some foul beans, non-regulation, will be discovered, and perhaps an unclean urn.

His business in Provence complete, Alan is stuck for two more days. Sabena only flies the connection from Nice to Chicago via Brussels on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays, and the Monday flight has been sold out for weeks. The Wednesday flight wasn't much better, with only one coach seat remaining and a ghost's chance of an upgrade. When he called to report the disappointing news to his office he got no sympathy from his colleagues and friends. Two extra days in Nice. How terrible it must be for him. His wife - soon to be *ex-wife* - will doubtlessly find this delay just one more thing to prompt anger, that is if she ever finds herself lucid enough to be angry. He had filed the papers just before leaving for Nice. He had planned on sharing the news with her himself, but she had been in no shape to hear it. By now, she would have been served the divorce papers. It might sober her up. For a minute. Or two.

Alan loves Lucille and thinks of her even now as he listens to the foreign drone of the late afternoon rush of shoppers and secretaries, of streetcars, motor bikes and autos. "She should be here with me. I could show Lucille a good time in such a romantic city," he thinks. Then he corrects himself. "That is, I once could." He pictures her with him, admiring the slanting shadows on the vendors stalls, the clicking echoes of pedestrians' feet on the ancient cobblestones.

These days, Lucille would not be interested. For some time she has thought of nothing but where her next drink is coming from. The woman he loved no longer exists, not in any form he can access.

So. Here he is. Alan. Alone in Nice for two days and two nights.

He'd considered spending this first free afternoon at the Matisse museum, but it was closed on Mondays. Or is it closed on Tuesdays? He can't recall. Besides, Alan thinks, if one

really wants to feel bad when one already feels all alone, just go to a museum. There he would be just one more relic among a collection of relics. 'Not what I need,' he thinks.

Sad cup of rancid coffee in hand, Alan commandeers the last available table on the crowded, sun-drenched sidewalk in front of the ubiquitous golden arches. "I'll just look at the people," he thinks. "I'll imagine *their* lives." It's a game Lucille taught him when they were first dating, both fresh from college and in love with the world and each other. You watch strangers as they move down the street and randomly pick out one person at a time to follow with your eyes. You make up stories about their lives: who they are, how they love, what they want. You make up their secrets. Once they pass out of sight, you pick another person.

The stream of people passes too quickly for him to focus on anyone at first. Finally, he zooms in on the surface traits from selected individuals and invents entire biographies.

The nervous young black woman who returns his glance. A student? Or does she live here? He decides she does, an Ethiopian refugee married to an older French merchant. No, a seaman. A Norwegian sea captain, in fact. They met in a foreign port. He was seeing her mother, then one night, ...

There. Those two older, elegant, short women, overdressed, supporting each other, one talking excitedly in the other's ear. They're lovers, united at last after the deaths of their husbands mysteriously in the same month. A sudden illness, both of them. Neither of the women is really interested in the flesh anymore, but they remember a time, long ago, and they savor that precious time together, for as long as it lasted. Now they are living on comfortable pensions, traveling together from their home in ... Austria. They stop to admire a store window. They ponder their reflections in the glass. Stooped. Aged. Together.

Who is this? The large, stumbling older man in the soiled red sports jacket with the ridiculously wide Statue of Liberty tie, bellowing faux opera to the wind, annoying everyone, his tin cup waving in the air. He comes here every day, always intoxicated, part of the local color. An American exile perhaps, from Texas. No. Mississippi. Exiled for thirty years, maybe more, he hardly remembers who he once was. Aspired to be a singer but got caught up in the drug trade when young. Socked enough away to retire in his 30s. Went insane out of boredom and paranoia. Ran out of money. Listen. He's made up an entire opera, the opera of the sidewalks. An *Aida* of the streets.

Alan's game is interrupted as a small Asian boy in a pressed school uniform crashes into, then steadies himself with, Alan's table. He has small, delicate fingers, chewed and dirty fingernails.. His over-stuffed backpack is almost as big as he is. His quick, dark eyes dart back

and forth, settling on Alan for less than a heartbeat. He's looking for someone, or something, but doesn't find it. He moves into the street, and is quickly gone.

Before Alan can make up a story about the boy, the opera singer is back. He's yelling at a young woman who is trying to get past him. The singer has switched to French, then something else, some other language. Czech? Polish? The woman turns, then runs away, crossing the street quickly, darting between the traffic which has slowed in the mire of late afternoon rush hour traffic. The singer flips a switch in his mind and now begins repeating "Hari Krishna, Hari Rama, Krishna Krishna, Hari Hari," in a forced falsetto. He chants louder and louder, faster and faster. People passing by him struggle unsuccessfully to ignore him. He twirls, his arms raised above his head. One of his arms flies indiscreetly into a tall, elegant woman dressed in a black cotton blouse, black jeans, black boots, with long flowing curly brown hair extending below her waist and shiny leather boots with tall heels, bright red lipstick. She stumbles, recovers, walks on.

"Lucille." Of course it's not. But she's back in his thoughts. "I need a Lucy-ectomy," he thinks, knowing as he thinks this that it may well be what he needs, but most certainly is not what he wants. What he wants is his old life back.

Time passes. Shadows lengthen. Lights begin to appear in the shops.

Alan raises his cup to his lips. The revolting coffee is now revoltingly cold. Perhaps he'll try the people game again. That Marxist-looking young fellow with the Che tattoo. Jesus, why would anyone have a Che tattoo in the 1990's.

Oh my god, that stunning couple who appear to be as wealthy and as much in love as they are beautiful. Alan instantly hates them. He hates their arms around each other's waist. He abhors the taut nipples protruding from the skin-tight black silk top of the woman, and the slim waist and firm pectorals of her companion, captured in the hug of a white cotton t-shirt. He despises their absence of body fat, their perfect haircuts, their expensive looking shopping bags. He deplores the matching silver bracelets on their wrists, the perfect angles of their jaws, their body heat, the language of their hands and eyes. Alan stands and leaves, walking in the opposite direction from the couple.

A block later, amid the boisterous al fresco cafes of the Zone de Piettone, Alan hears fierce shouting directly behind him. It's the opera singer. A moment later, the singer is in Alan's face. Abhorrent blotches on his face grow redder as he twists the beauty of the French language into something hateful. Alan turns to escape the man, but before he can take a step, the man lunges, grabs Alan's arm, turns him. He forces a crumpled envelope into Alan's hand. For

just a second, he stops shouting and says to Alan in perfect American English, “You. Only you can help me. Take this. Say nothing.” Then he turns and hastens away. Alan quickly loses sight of him.

Shaken, but remarkably unperturbed, Alan drops the envelope in the first trash bin he encounters. Amused, he congratulates himself for doing exactly as the strange man said. He took the envelope. He said nothing.

He continues walking along the busy pedestrian avenue. Everyone is walking fast. They each have some place to be, he thinks. He has no idea what he is going to do next. There’s a chill in the air as the sky slides into night. Overhead strings of colored lights illuminate tourists settling into sidewalk cafes.

Outside the Negresco, a mime silently pleads to be noticed. Alan silently ignores him.

## 2.

---

The sweet Mediterranean air invades Alan’s lungs as he breathes deeply on his morning run along the promenade beside the Avenue des Anglais. Despite the cool temperature and the overcast skies, he quickly breaks a sweat. It is his first exercise in a week, and all his muscles are grateful for finally being put to work. This morning, like so many others, it had been a bit of a chore to get the run started. But a mile or so into the run, Alan feels the familiar warmth, the hum, the peculiar alignment of the polarity of his molecules that always leaves him feeling better and happier. Running is the only drug he requires, the one addiction he’s proud to claim.

The beach is almost empty on this early fall, off-season morning. Alan jogs by various configurations of old women - reclining on the peeling, green benches, walking their small, nervous dogs, carrying cloth bags on their way to or from the market. He encounters occasional other runners. Most are as methodically temperate as he. Others appear to be in final training for the triathlon scheduled for the coming weekend, many of these sporting shirts which boast of previous participation in competitive events around the world – Sao Paolo, Berlin, San Jose.

He runs west then south into the October sun along the long horseshoe curve of the sea. To his left is the fathomless Mediterranean punctuated with a few old and rugged fishing boats, and almost to the horizon one sleek, idly-moving cruise ship. To his right is the broad palm-bordered avenue, straight and flat, site of the annual Gran Prix finish line. Beyond the avenue like a movie set backdrop, rear the rich pastels of boutique hotels and the tall, closed gates of private residences. This is Audrey Hepburn country, he thinks. Cary Grant. Princess Grace.

His internal sensors inform him he's gone three miles, and he turns back toward Nice, leaving behind his malaise from the night before. That's always been his kick - to run a decent distance, drop his cares, oxygenate his mind and return. Nice is prettier from a distance, he observes. Better than the postcards. He picks up his pace and lengthens his stride for the return. The stiffness is gone from his muscles. His gait is natural and light. This is what he was made for. To run in the sun on a beach. He completes his run in the wake of a blatant tri-athlete, forcing himself to match the agile runner stride for stride.

A hundred yards from the Negresco, he stops and stretches, then slowly descends the concrete steps to Blue Beach, filling his lungs with salt-infused air. Step by step, his heartbeat slows. It is still early. The beach is empty here. A few old men stand or sit at some distance in either direction. He stretches again. When he touches his toes, he admires the sweat on the fine hairs of his legs in the morning sun, the pulse of his heart in the blue veins above his ankles.

Alan descends the steps to the pebbled beach. Someone has carried to the beach one of the faded-blue wooden chairs from the Negresco promenade. Alan claims it. He sits, breathes in and out with the rhythm of the waves, subconsciously practicing his own bastard brand of yoga. A trio of chattering gulls dive for fish, fail, and dive again. A small prop plane crosses the horizon, its buzz faint under the hiss of the sea and the hum of the city. He closes his eyes. Listens. An air hammer's distant, staccato 'ping'. The passing of a sputtering motorbike. A child's laughter. A mother's rebuke/ A quiet wave retreating from the shore.

He languorously opens his eyes. A silhouetted fisherman in a small wooden boat, its once-bright blues and reds mottled and ruined by years of brine, motors slowly up the coast. The air smells of cinnamon and diesel.

The chair is uncomfortable. Alan moves to the sloping stone retaining wall, sits on the rough surface and leans back. His body adjusts and responds to the hard cool stones. He closes his eyes. He relaxes in the surreal glow of a post-run recovery. He drops to the edge of consciousness.

Rocks shift under approaching steps. Alan rouses and raises his head slightly. A thin old man, at least seventy, maybe eighty, with long white hair and clean but well-worn clothes is walking near the edge of the water. He stops directly in front of Alan, puts down a tattered bag. He searches the rocks for something. He picks up a large stone, and scrapes at other stones. Alan is fascinated and clueless about the purpose of this primitive ritual. Seemingly satisfied, the man puts down the rock. From the bag, he retrieves a small, threadbare piece of brown cloth, hardly larger than a washcloth, and lays it on the rocks where he has been scraping. He examines

the cloth. Turns it over. Examines it again. Turns it over again. Alan lies back. Closes his eyes.

When he sits up again a few minutes later the old man has stripped to nothing more than a g-string. Alan approves of the European shamelessness in undressing on the beach, but for himself he retains his inbred American modesty. Fit though he is, he'd never be seen in a g-string.

The old man stands on the small square of brown cloth, facing away from Alan toward the sea. He moves his arms in a private rhythm, exploring the aching limits of his agility. He rocks his head from shoulder to shoulder, his eyes toward the sky. The thin black string rides low, well below his waist, cutting into his sad, sagging buttocks. His skin dark like tanned leather hangs in shallow folds that define his perhaps once graceful body. It's not a pretty sight, Alan thinks. Then changes his mind.

There's something neat about him. Something holy. Is this a daily ritual? Alan can picture the old man coming to the beach every morning, perhaps to this very spot, for his communion with the sea. There's something satisfying in contemplating that this is how this one old man approaches the end of his life. It may even be how he once approached his youth.

The old man enters the sea. Alan lies back again. And falls asleep.

### 3.

---

Alan stirs - his body and soul refreshed from the run, the nap, the sea. It is warmer. The clouds have broken. Generous sunlight bathes Alan's face, his hands, his legs. The old man is clothed now, gathering the shabby brown cloth, preparing to leave. A short distance to his left, a second old man is undressing. An equal distance to his right, a third has left his sparse belongings. Alan finds him only a few yards out exercising in the sea. This must be a section of beach where old men come in the morning, he thinks.

Alan removes his shirt, his shoes and socks. He carries no valuables, not even a room key, since he left that, according to the custom, at the Negresco front desk. Alan walks over the pebbles toward the sea and greets a fourth old man who is preparing to depart. The greeting goes unacknowledged. He feels conspicuous in his running shorts, his own body pale and lithe, among an gathering of leathery old men in threadbare thongs.

The water is refreshingly warm. Alan enters slowly until he's waist deep, then pauses, feeling the play of gentle waves as they alternately define him as wet and dry, warm and cool. He turns to face the shore.

A young woman is walking down the beach carrying her sandals in one hand, stepping carefully on the rocks. She wears a simple white cotton dress that clings tightly to her slim, perfect body. She glows with the colors of the sea reflected on her skin, her dress. Her straight dark hair falls softly to her shoulders. She is evenly, deeply tanned. She is strikingly, breathtakingly beautiful.

She stops at the water's edge, only a few yards from Alan. Alan is suddenly self-conscious, embarrassed to be so obviously spellbound, but unwilling to look away. She slowly scans the sea from east to west, looking though Alan, raising her arms above her head, arching her back, bending from the waist first in one direction, then the other. When she stops, she is looking at him. Straight into his eyes. He holds her glance, then looks away. She's so beautiful. It's not right somehow for him to look at her like this.

He falls backwards into the sea. Buoyed by the salt, he begins a strong stroke that takes him some distance. He's not as frequent a swimmer as he once was, so he knows not to push his limits. He stops his retreat from the shore and treads water, a respite before his return.

The girl is still on the shore. She has removed her dress. She stands facing the sea, her arms extended outwards at an angle, her palms up, her face turned into the sun. Alan is captured by her loveliness, her impossible innocence. In his world, a sight like this could never happen. He continues to tread water and watch from a distance, afraid that if he moves closer, she'll disappear. Soon, though, he needs to see her features more clearly. He wants to imprint this moment in his mind and he needs to know the specifics of her face.

He's certain she's aware that he is watching. She's made no move to cover herself or leave. That's hardly an invitation, but he'll not have another chance. Slowly he begins paddling toward her, his head out of the water, savoring the increasing distinctness of her shape, the revelation of her glistening skin, the soft line of her jaw, the arc of her hands, the impossible plane of her belly, her small, firm breasts, the dark triangle of her sex. She's looking directly at Alan. He pauses his advance, finds footing on the sea bed. The water is lapping just below his nipples. He wonders what she sees when she looks at him.

She enters the water and comes deliberately to Alan. They stand at arms' length, not speaking, not touching. Her eyes examine him. It frightens and pleases him. He wants the girl. He needs to touch her, to have her touch him. He balances on the precipice between doing



nothing and reaching for her. As long as he makes no advance, she seems to allow him his pleasure in looking. He waits, till her image is imbedded in him, until he has visited a false memory of having held her before. She steps toward him. Her hand reaches out to his chest.

This is what it's like when the angels sing. He remains motionless, photographing every shadow of her face, every imperfection in her eyes, while she slowly, lightly traces the contour of his chest, his shoulders, his stomach. Her half-open eyes are dreamily intense. Her moist, arched lips remain closed and unsmiling. Alan tentatively touches her arm. She allows him. He moves his hand down her arm, lifts her small, unblemished hand from the water. He cups her hand in both of his, brings it to his lips. Her free hand slips inside his shorts. She finds him. She explores his length with light caresses. He continues to hold her other hand. She grips him now. Neither moves. His eyes drop to her breasts, her nipples visibly taut just below the water. If it ends now, it ends now. He will be satisfied.

But it doesn't end. She starts manipulating him. She studies his face, his neck, his chin, his eyes. She responds to his responses. She intensifies her embrace. Alan opens his mouth. He winces. Her breath matches his quickening. She runs her tongue across her lower lip. The pounding of blood in his ears blocks out the sound of the sea. Nothing exists but the girl and the moment.

He closes his eyes as his seed enters the water in long, sustained spasms. He stands, floats, motionless save for the gentle push and pull of the tide, secured from floating away only by her grip.. The sound of the sea returns. She releases him. A moment later, she ducks under the water and disappears, reappearing several yards away, expertly swimming out to sea.

4

---

Alan waits till the last minute to enter the plane. Not only is his seat in coach, it's a middle seat. His Gold status couldn't rescue him from this indignity. Perhaps he should have waited until Friday when he could have flown First Class. Perhaps. But he didn't. Two beers in the executive lounge have done nothing to ease his discomfort.

He leans back – as far back as a coach middle seat allows him to lean back – closes his eyes and thinks of her. He hasn't been able to stop thinking of her.

It was like nothing that had ever happened to him before. Even his imagination, robust as it is, had never suggested a moment so fulfilling. But this was not his imagination. This had actually happened.

Hadn't it?

Alan dozes through the announcements and is reminded by the touch of a humorless flight attendant to bring his seat back forward. The plane accelerates. Takes off. The seat belt sign blinks off.

Alan's bladder decides he should go to the washroom before he falls asleep, or more importantly, before his aisle-mate falls asleep. He mutters an insincere apology and climbs his way over the unresponsive teenager with the earphones who has staked out the aisle. He waits for the washroom to clear, then enters and locks it.

What did she see in him as she stood on the shore?

Why him?

Had she done this before?

Who was she?

Did it mean anything?

Unzipping, he holds his penis in his hand.